



“We did conclude among ourselves to settle a meeting, to see one another’s faces and open our hearts one to another in the truth of God...”

Quaker faith & practice 6.02



Holding Quaker business meetings by teleconference

Dearly beloved Friends, these things we do not lay upon you as a rule or form to walk by, but that all, with the measure of light which is pure and holy, may be guided; and so in the light walking and abiding, these may be fulfilled in the Spirit, not from the letter, for the letter killeth, but the Spirit giveth life.

Postscript to an epistle to 'the brethren in the north'
issued by a meeting of elders at Balby, 1656

What are telephone and videoconferencing?

Teleconferencing

A teleconference is a phone call involving several people who can all hear what the others say. The only technology needed is a telephone, either landline or mobile – do make sure the battery is charged up! There are many service providers and the mechanisms are very straightforward.

Videoconferencing

A videoconference takes place using a computer, tablet, mobile phone or other device with video capability, connected to a medium- to high-speed broadband internet connection. There are many providers of videoconferencing, the most well-known being Skype. This is a free service that allows people to see and speak to each other individually or in groups around a terminal. Participants can join a videoconference whether they have video capability or not and for that person it is similar to a telephone conference. It is possible to join with just a handset connected to the internet but there may be a cost implication for this method. This cost can be set so that the person who initiates the call will be the only person billed, which makes reimbursement from Quaker funds easy.

The meeting clerk or convener arranges the time of the meeting in the usual way and provides participants with the relevant method of accessing the telephone or videoconference.

Costs involved

There may be costs involved with both telephone and internet conferencing. In most cases, telephone conferencing providers offer a range of ways to dial in that might often include one or more of the following options:

- a freephone number billed to the account (the area meeting or committee)
- a local call rate number on which callers can use inclusive minutes in their call plan (often at evenings and/or weekends)
- a number starting 03 which is set at local call rate and on which callers using mobile phones will be able to use inclusive minutes from their call plan.

The cost of calling in using a mobile phone can be high, particularly if the bill payer's call plan does not have inclusive minutes or the phone provider does not honour free calls to numbers beginning 0800 or 0808.

There may be charges for setting up a videoconferencing account, which an area meeting (or committee or other organisation) might take responsibility for so that there is no cost to the user at the point of use.

Why use telephone or videoconferencing?

Telephone and videoconferences are no substitute for those essential face-to-face meetings where we can open our hearts to one another. They are however a very valuable supplementary process and can be a good way to conduct many kinds of Quaker business, especially when it is impractical for all concerned to gather in person.

Holding a Quaker business meeting by telephone or videoconference lowers the carbon footprint and financial cost of a meeting by reducing travel. It also saves participants significant time and personal energy. It enables more frequent meetings, reducing the length of the agenda on each occasion. This helps those for whom meetings can be tiring, including those who have to make increased efforts to communicate, or those with mobility difficulties. It also allows groups to gather locally if telephone conferencing equipment is used. In very widely scattered groups, the process enables more people, especially those with mobility constraints, to take part, and prevents weather or travel disruption forcing cancellation or low attendance. So this can be a proper response to particular situations and a creative example of Quaker openness to new light.

For telephone or videoconferencing to work well as a Meeting for Worship, specific practical and spiritual disciplines are needed. This guidance has been prepared to help Quakers who may be new to such business meetings to see how it could work for them. It draws on Quakers' experience from across Britain who have used teleconferencing for area meetings, for sub-groups of national Quaker committees, Quaker trusts, and Friends World Committee for Consultation.

Why not use telephone or videoconferencing?

Teleconferencing does not work well for those who lip-read or for whom visual contact assists communication. Videoconferencing such as Skype is not always very accurately synchronised, which is not helpful for lip-readers. Other software such as Facetime is slightly better in one-to-one use but may not fare better for group calls and may have a cost implication.

Teleconferencing and Quaker business method

Experience shows that we can maintain the worshipping spirit of our Quaker business meetings very well using telephone and videoconferencing. It does require us to be alert to seeking the most appropriate ways to ensure right ordering and discernment, according to the circumstances.

Both telephone and videoconferencing are very effective when dealing with routine business or any matters that do not need threshing or extended consideration. Difficult matters needing lengthy discernment are clearly best handled face-to-face. For example, telephone or videoconferencing may not be suitable for deciding on new member applications, where drawing out more information from the report writers directly may be required. Many decisions do not need lengthy discernment and thinking ahead will enable the clerk or planning group to ensure that the business fits the type of meeting which is chosen. It may often be helpful for (sub-)committees to meet by telephone or videoconference.

One simple factor is key to maintaining confidence in Quaker discernment by telephone or videoconferencing: while the method has been adapted to a new medium, the principles of the Quaker business meeting remain unchanged. As in other business meetings, we need to plan properly, to agree the process for the meetings, and to allow time for all participants to learn how it works.

Context and preparation

Ideally, those taking part in a telephone or videoconference should already have participated in a face-to-face meeting. If the group is to meet regularly, face-to-face meetings should still be a part of the schedule. But if someone new joins a conferencing group it is helpful for the clerk or convener to speak with them beforehand, to establish personal contact and answer any queries.

It is important that everyone knows in advance who will be in the group. It also helps people to feel included if contact details can be shared in advance. Members of the group need to know something of one another as working partners and they will understand and trust each other better if they are familiar with each other's voices, mannerisms and approaches.

The clerk or convener will need to prepare and circulate the agenda, reports and draft minutes early enough to ensure that everyone has time to read and digest them. Advance planning is very important and will make your telephone or videoconference run smoothly. Be wary of taking items at short notice as people may not have time to take in complex information before they join the call and may lengthen the discernment and minute drafting time. Remember that not everyone has access to email. It helps for the agenda to be fuller than for other meetings, perhaps indicating the different stages to be considered within a single item and maybe even the length of time that might be needed. Draft minutes help speed up routine decision-making and may mean that the clerk does not need to read out a lengthy but uncontentious minute.

Telephone and videoconferencing can be conducive to good Quaker practice because it strengthens the need to listen and to come prepared.

Holding the meeting

Participants

You will need to be in a quiet, comfortable space with a desk or table for papers, where you will not be distracted and will be able to join readily in the telephone meeting for worship. Have all relevant papers (and perhaps a drink) beside you. Be on time (call in at least three to five minutes early). If you may need to leave early, tell the clerk beforehand, or at the start of the call. If late, simply give your name when asked, or at the first natural pause, then wait for the clerk to call you in.

Some Friends may not find it easy to recognise voices; unless the group is very small, give your name each time you speak.

As in any meeting for worship for church affairs, receive ministry in worship and allow space between contributions.

Clerk

Welcome everyone to the call and check all are present.

Spend an agreed time in worship together. It may help everyone to feel part of group worship if a reading forms part of the worship.

Remind participants of the guidelines for a conference call.

Review the agenda

Ask participants to introduce themselves; this helps people get used to the process and to each other's voices. As in any meeting, the clerk needs to ensure that all participants feel equally able to contribute and that quieter voices are heard. One way to do so is to have a list of participants and note down who has spoken.

Clerk the conference as you would a normal meeting, announcing each new topic, inviting an opening speaker where appropriate, and making and agreeing minutes as you go. Take particular care to ensure that all participants play their full part, without any individuals dominating the call. If callers are attempting to speak at once, bring the call to order and designate one person to speak.

If an item proves difficult and results in an awkwardly long silence, consider inviting participants to share any tentative leadings, and/or explicitly invite anyone who has not yet spoken to do so before the minute is written.

If the call will overrun, indicate this in good time and check who is unable to stay.

Closing the call

Go round the group to check for additional comments. Review matters for action. End with a few moments of silent worship. Thank everyone for participating.

Teleconferencing and charity law

In England and Wales teleconferencing can only be used for a charity's trustee decisions when special provision has been made in the charity deed. This is because charity law in England and Wales requires trustees to conduct their business in such a way that participants can both see and hear each other, unless the charity's trust deed specifically allows for teleconference business meetings (see the relevant extracts from Charity Commission below). This means that trustee decisions (approval of accounts, appointments, key policy or business decisions) need to be made face-to-face (or by videoconference) unless the trust deed allows otherwise. There is no such restriction on teleconferencing in Scottish law.

Meetings may well consider amending their governing document (as advised by Quaker Stewardship Committee) so that no possible confusion can arise.

It may be helpful to reiterate that, regardless of the above, teleconferencing is quite acceptable in any trustee work that is preparatory to a decision – for example for nominations work, and for exploring issues prior to a formal decision at a face-to-face meeting, as well as for dealing with practical matters that don't need a formal decision by trustees. It is also worth bearing in mind that any provisional decision can be confirmed at a later face-to-face meeting.

Charity Commission on teleconferencing law, relevant extracts

9. The courts have decided that a valid meeting normally consists of people who can both see and hear each other (*Byng v London Life Association* (1989) 1 All ER 560). This definition will apply where a charity's governing document gives no other definition of a meeting.

12. In contrast, as telephone conferencing only permits the participant to hear but not see each other it does not constitute a 'meeting' within the meaning of the decision in the *Byng* case. However, it is still possible for meetings to be arranged in the form of a telephone conference if, and only if, there is a specific provision in the charity's governing document. If there is no power in the governing document to hold meetings by telephone the trustees can alter the governing document to adopt such a power. This alteration can be made if there is a suitable power of amendment in the charity's governing document. Or, if there is no suitable power of amendment, the trustees can rely on the power given by s.21 of the Companies Act 2006, in the case of a charitable company, or s.280 of the Charities Act 2011, in the case of an unincorporated charity, to make the alteration.

For further guidance from the Charity Commission, visit:
www.charity-commission.gov.uk/publications/cc48.aspx.

Appendix: example of teleconference guidance

West Scotland Area Meeting has used teleconferencing for many years. Several local meetings now schedule group meetings for area meeting, using special conference phones provided by area meeting. Its guidance notes follow.

One to two weeks before

Tell the assistant clerk that you will be joining the call and share contact details.

On the day

The conference number is? The PIN is? The back-up number is?

Have you read the agenda, reports and draft minutes? Have you arranged a quiet space for worship with access to the telephone? Have you read *Quaker faith and practice* e.g. 10.21 (first paragraph)?

If meeting beforehand and joining the call as a local meeting group, please make sure that the person speaking speaks directly into the microphone.

Suggested times

6.45pm, gather for refreshment and read through papers

7.00pm, meeting for worship (reading: *Quaker faith & practice* 10.21)

7.30pm join the call.

- Roll call.
- Clerk will introduce the business.
- If you wish to speak, give your name and meeting and then wait for the assistant clerk to call you.
- Give your name and meeting again at the start of your ministry.
- Remember that this is a Quaker business meeting. Follow our practice of receiving ministry in worship and allowing space between contributions.
- When it appears that all contributions have been made the assistant clerk will ask if there are any final contributions.
- The clerk will prepare and read the minute.
- Once one person has accepted the minute, others can agree with silence.
- If you wish to speak give your name and meeting and wait to be called.
- Once all the business has been concluded the clerk will ask for silence during which the minutes will be signed.
- The meeting will then be closed; you may end the call.

West Scotland Area Meeting, 2011, updated 2016

In our meetings for worship we seek through the stillness to know God's will for ourselves and for the gathered group. Our meetings for church affairs, in which we conduct our business, are also meetings for worship based on silence, and they carry the same expectation that God's guidance can be discerned if we are truly listening together and to each other, and are not blinkered by preconceived opinions. It is this belief that God's will can be recognised through the discipline of silent waiting which distinguishes our decision-making process from the secular idea of consensus. We have a common purpose in seeking God's will through waiting and listening, believing that every activity of life should be subject to divine guidance.



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